What Trump, Orbán, and Marine Le Pen Owe to a Norwegian Farmer: A Philosophical Essay on Growth of the Soil

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The Quarrel Over Civilization

A quarrel runs through the whole of the nineteenth century and arrives, still unresolved, at the doorstep of 1917. Not a quarrel about politics in the narrow sense, nor about theology, though it touches both. The quarrel is about what the progress of civilization actually costs, and whether the price is worth paying. On one side stand those who believe that the advance of industry, science, urban life, and rational organization represents the genuine fulfillment of human possibility. On the other stand those who suspect that something essential to human beings — something rooted, instinctual, and vital — is being quietly destroyed in the very act of building the modern world. Knut Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil*, published in Norway in 1917, enters this quarrel not as a philosophical treatise but as something more unsettling: a novel that makes the opposing case feel not merely argued but *lived*, embodied in a man and a patch of earth, rendered so concretely that abstraction becomes almost impossible to retreat to.

The stakes of that quarrel, and the thinkers who shaped them, are necessary to understand what Hamsun's novel actually risks.

Why Progress Needed a Counterargument

The dominant intellectual inheritance of the nineteenth century was, broadly speaking, optimistic about civilization. The tradition descending from the Enlightenment — from Condorcet's vision of indefinite human perfectibility, from the utilitarian calculus of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, from the positivism of Auguste Comte — held that the application of reason to human affairs would steadily improve the conditions of life. Science would conquer disease and ignorance. Industry would conquer poverty and scarcity. Education would conquer superstition and cruelty. The city, with its newspapers, its lecture halls, its railways and telegraphs, was the natural home of this improving creature, the rational citizen. Progress, on this view, was not merely possible but directional: history moved, however unevenly, toward greater knowledge, greater comfort, and greater freedom.

The Enlightenment tradition was not a naive position. Mill himself worried about the tyranny of social conformity, about the flattening of individual character under the pressure of mass opinion.

The great liberal tradition was aware of its own dangers. But the remedy it proposed was always more civilization, not less — more education, more open debate, more rational self-governance. The city might produce vulgarity and conformism, but the answer was to reform the city, not to abandon it.

By the middle of the century, a counter-tradition had gathered enough force to constitute a genuine intellectual challenge. Its most powerful early voice was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose influence extended far beyond his own century. Rousseau had argued — scandalously, to many of his contemporaries — that civilization corrupts rather than perfects human nature. The natural human being, living simply and close to the earth, possessed a wholeness and a moral spontaneity that sophisticated society systematically destroys. Property, inequality, vanity, and the endless multiplication of artificial needs: these were the gifts of progress, and they came at the cost of something Rousseau called *amour de soi* — a plain, unselfconscious love of one's own existence — which civilization replaced with *amour-propre*, the anxious, competitive craving for the esteem of others. Rousseau's distinction is worth pausing over: Rousseau was not saying that primitive people are morally superior because they are ignorant. He was saying that the very refinements civilization prizes — wit, ambition, social grace, the hunger for distinction — are forms of inner corruption, ways of becoming dependent on the opinions of others rather than rooted in one's own being.

Rousseau's challenge was absorbed, transformed, and radicalized over the following century. The German Romantic movement — Schiller, Novalis, the early Schlegel — took up his intuition that modernity had produced a fatal *division* in the human being, a splitting of thought from feeling, of the individual from the community, of the human from the natural world. Schiller's concept of the *naive* and the *sentimental* — the naive being the condition of wholeness in which the ancient Greek or the peasant lives unselfconsciously within nature, the sentimental being the modern condition of longing for that lost unity while being forever separated from it — gave the quarrel a new and poignant form. The modern intellectual, on Schiller's account, cannot go back. He can only look back, and in looking back, understand what has been lost.

The Philosophical Quarrel Becomes a Social Fact

What makes this debate more than an academic exercise is that it was being fought out simultaneously in the domain of actual social change. The decades between 1850 and 1917 saw the most rapid and thoroughgoing transformation of European and Scandinavian rural life in recorded history. Industrialization drew millions from the land into the cities. Agricultural communities that had maintained their rhythms for centuries were disrupted, depopulated, and in many cases dissolved. In Norway specifically — Hamsun's Norway — this transformation was visible and felt within living memory. The fishing villages and farming communities of the north were being drawn into a modern economy whose center of gravity lay elsewhere, in the cities, in the markets, in the decisions of distant administrators and financiers.

The social reality of rural depopulation gave the philosophical quarrel an urgency that pure theory could not supply. The question of what civilization costs was not merely a question for professors. The cost could be read in the emptying of villages, in the faces of men who had left the land for the factory, in the statistics of urban poverty that reformers catalogued with such conscientious horror. The debate had stakes.

Into this charged atmosphere came Friedrich Nietzsche, whose influence on European intellectual life by the early twentieth century was enormous and deeply ambiguous. Nietzsche was not a simple partisan of the Rousseauian counter-tradition — he despised Rousseau's sentimentality and his democratic implications — but he shared the fundamental diagnosis that modern civilization was producing a diminished, weakened, and spiritually impoverished human type. His concept of *decadence* — by which he meant not mere moral looseness but a condition in which the vital instincts are turned against themselves, in which life-denying values masquerade as the highest ideals — gave the critique of modernity a new and ferocious edge. The modern European, comfortable, rational, humanitarian, and progressive, was for Nietzsche a figure of profound spiritual failure: the *last man*, who has invented happiness and blinks. Against this figure Nietzsche set his vision of the human being who affirms life in its fullness, who does not flinch from struggle, suffering, and the demands of genuine creativity.

Hamsun had read Nietzsche, and the influence is not difficult to detect. But Hamsun's relationship to these ideas is more complicated than simple discipleship, and it is precisely this complication that makes *Growth of the Soil* philosophically interesting rather than merely illustrative.

Norway in 1917: What the Novel Is Written Against

To understand what *Growth of the Soil* is philosophically doing requires holding in mind the historical moment of its composition. Hamsun began work on the novel around 1915 and published it in 1917 — during the worst years of the First World War, the largest industrialized catastrophe in European history. Hamsun's Norway was formally neutral, but neutrality did not mean insulation. The war had disrupted Norwegian trade, caused economic hardship, and created the anxious awareness that the civilization whose progress European intellectuals had been celebrating was capable of directing its reason, its science, its organizational capacity, and its industrial production toward the project of killing as many human beings as possible with maximum efficiency. The Enlightenment dream of progress was, in 1917, literally exploding in the trenches of the Somme and Verdun.

Against this background, the opening of *Growth of the Soil* carries a weight that pure philosophical analysis does not exhaust. A man walks into empty wilderness and begins to build. Not to destroy: to build. He does not command armies, organize logistics, manufacture munitions, or apply science to the problem of killing. He cuts trees, digs soil, lays foundations. The gesture is elementary — as elementary as a gesture can be — and its elementariness is charged, in 1917, with everything that European civilization was in the process of demonstrating about itself. Hamsun did not need to announce the contrast. It was written into the historical circumstances of the novel's publication. European modernity was making explicit what the counter-tradition had always suspected: that the rationalization of human life, when extended to its logical conclusion, could produce industrial warfare as readily as it produced industrial agriculture. Isak is the counter-image — not the critique, which is easy, but the alternative, held up for inspection with patient, unflinching attention.

Norway itself had undergone rapid transformation in the decades before 1917. The fishing villages and farming communities of the interior, which had maintained their rhythms for generations, were being drawn into a modern economy centered on cities and on the export of fish, timber, and eventually oil and shipping revenues. The rural depopulation that Rousseau had diagnosed as a philosophical problem and that German Romanticism had mourned as a cultural loss was, in Norway, a living social reality. The people leaving the land were not hypothetical figures in a philosophical argument; they were the parents and grandparents of Hamsun's contemporaries. The landscape Hamsun's novel imagines as the site of Isak's creation was not merely picturesque Scandinavian wilderness; it was the specific geography of a country in the process of losing the form of life that had organized it for centuries. The novel's choice to begin at the origin — a single man, empty land, no prior community to draw on — is not merely mythological. It is the fantasy of starting over, at a historical moment when starting over looked both necessary and impossible.

Bergson and the Novel That Shows Rather Than Argues

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the critique of rationalist civilization had found a new philosophical vocabulary in what might broadly be called the vitalist tendency in European thought. The French philosopher Henri Bergson — whose work was widely read and debated across Europe by 1910 — argued that the intellect, by its very nature, falsifies life. The intellect works by breaking continuous reality into discrete, manageable pieces, by substituting static snapshots for living flow. This is enormously useful for practical purposes, for science and technology and the organization of social life. But it means that the intellect is constitutively unable to grasp what is most real about existence: the continuous, creative, irreversible movement of life itself, which Bergson called the *élan vital* — the vital impulse. To live fully, on Bergson's account, is to act from intuition rather than calculation, to be in contact with the living current of one's own being rather than with the intellectual map one has made of it.

Bergson was not a primitivist, and he did not advocate a return to the soil. But his philosophy provided a rigorous conceptual framework for a suspicion that many people already felt: that the rationalized, urbanized, bureaucratized world of modern civilization was somehow *less alive* than what it had replaced, that something vital was being lost in the very act of organizing and improving human existence.

The intellectual atmosphere into which Hamsun's novel arrives — shaped by Rousseau's original challenge, deepened by Romantic philosophy, given social urgency by the actual transformation of rural life, sharpened by Nietzsche's diagnosis of decadence, and given new philosophical respectability by Bergson's vitalism — is one in which the question of what civilization costs has become impossible to evade. *Growth of the Soil* enters this atmosphere not to argue but to show. A man named Isak walks into an empty wilderness in the Norwegian interior, drives a stake into the ground, and begins to build. He does not deliberate. He does not calculate. He simply acts, with a patience and a steadiness that the novel presents not as stupidity but as a form of wisdom so deep it has forgotten it is wisdom.

The Sacred Ground

Before philosophy, there is myth. *Growth of the Soil* operates simultaneously in both registers, and holding them together matters — the mythological dimension is not decorative ornament on a philosophical argument but the argument's deepest ground.

The novel's opening is not merely the beginning of a narrative; it is a creation. A man walks into empty wilderness, drives a stake into the ground, and makes the land fruitful from nothing. The name Hamsun gives him is Isak — Isaac, the son of Abraham, the child of the covenant, the one whose birth was impossible and whose life was a gift. The farm he builds is called Sellanraa, which in Norwegian suggests something like the marsh-ridge — but in the novel's handling it

accumulates the quality of a named and blessed place, an Eden to which the narrative returns again and again with the reverence one extends to something original and unrepeatable. The animals come. The crops grow. The family multiplies. The structure is unmistakably Edenic, and Hamsun is not using it casually.

The mythological framing matters philosophically because it adds a dimension to the counter-Enlightenment argument that neither Rousseau nor Nietzsche nor Bergson fully supplied. For the rationalist tradition, the critique of civilization is secular: the costs are measurable, the losses are describable in terms of human psychology and social arrangement. For the vitalist tradition from Nietzsche, the alternative to decadence is also secular: the affirmation of vital force, the this-worldly embrace of life in its fullness. What Hamsun's mythological framing introduces is a claim that goes beyond the secular terms of both: that the form of life Isak embodies is not merely pre-modern or pre-civilized but *sacred*, that the relationship between a human being and the earth he works has a character that the categories of philosophy — vitalism, naturalism, primitivism — cannot fully capture because those categories are themselves the products of the disenchanted world that has lost what Isak has. The Biblical resonance is not decorative. It is the novel's way of saying that the loss of rooted life is not merely a psychological or social impoverishment but a theological one — a falling away from something that was once understood as holy.

Inger's hare lip, the infanticide, the trial, the exile, the return: in the secular philosophical frame, these are the plot that tests Isak's stability against the disruptions civilization introduces. In the mythological frame, they are fall, punishment, exile, and redemption — the Old Testament pattern enacted on a Norwegian farm, in a world where the theological categories have become social ones but have not lost their structure. Inger returns to Sellanraa changed and is slowly restored. The farm persists. The sacred ground holds. Hamsun does not argue for any of this; he lets the mythological resonance accumulate in the texture of the novel's rendering, so that the philosophical argument and the sacred claim reinforce each other without either being reduced to the other.

The Schiller Problem

A passage near the opening of Friedrich Schiller's 1795 essay *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* has the quality of a philosophical trap sprung on the reader before the reader has noticed the mechanism. Schiller observes that we feel a peculiar emotion when we contemplate simple, unreflective natural beings — children, peasants, certain animals — an emotion that is not quite admiration and not quite envy but something compounded of both, tinged with melancholy. We recognize in these beings a wholeness we once possessed and no longer do. But the recognition itself is the proof of our loss. The peasant does not feel the beauty of his own rootedness; he simply lives it. We feel it precisely because we no longer live it. The emotion that draws us toward naïve existence is generated by the distance that makes naïve existence inaccessible to us. To be moved by unreflective life is already to be the kind of person who cannot live unreflectively.

Schiller called the modern, self-conscious mode of being *sentimental* — not in the debased sense of the word, but in the precise sense of a sensibility that feels its own condition, that is always at one remove from immediate experience, always observing itself in the act of living. The naïve person, by contrast, simply is what he is. He does not stand outside his own existence and evaluate it. He does not experience his labor as meaningful; he labors. He does not experience his connection to the earth as a philosophical affirmation; he is connected. The moment a human being begins to experience these things as meaningful — the moment meaning becomes something felt rather than simply enacted — that person has crossed into the sentimental mode and cannot return.

The naïve/sentimental distinction is not a minor technical one. It is a diagnosis of the entire counter-tradition that runs from Rousseau through German Romanticism to Nietzsche and Bergson. Every thinker in that tradition who celebrates instinctual wholeness, vital immediacy, or organic rootedness does so from a position of sophisticated self-consciousness that is structurally incompatible with the condition being celebrated. Rousseau, who wrote with extraordinary rhetorical power about the corrupting effects of civilization, was himself one of the most self-tormented, self-analyzing, self-dramatizing figures in the history of European letters. Nietzsche, who exalted the Dionysian — the ecstatic, unreflective surrender to vital force — was a philologist of almost pathological precision, a man who could not write a sentence without being aware of every word's genealogy. Bergson, who argued that the intellect falsifies lived experience by breaking it into static, measurable units, made this argument through a prose of extraordinary analytical refinement. The counter-tradition is constitutively sentimental in Schiller's sense: it knows what it has lost, and that knowledge is the form of the loss.

Knut Hamsun was not exempt from this structure. He was a man who had lived in Chicago and Minneapolis, who had lectured on American cultural vulgarity, who had read widely in European literature and philosophy, who had written novels of considerable psychological complexity before he wrote *Growth of the Soil*. When he sat down to create Isak — the silent, instinct-driven settler who breaks wilderness into farmland without apparent self-reflection, without ambition in any

recognizable modern sense, without the need to justify his existence to himself or anyone else — Hamsun was performing an act of extraordinary literary self-consciousness. He was constructing naïveté. The question this raises is not merely biographical but formally philosophical: can constructed naïveté do the philosophical work that genuine naïveté would do? Can a sentimental artist make a naïve argument?

The Honest Contradiction

The temptation is to conclude that the answer is simply no — that Hamsun's project is self-defeating, that the novel's celebration of instinctual earth-rooted life is undermined by the very sophistication required to produce it, and that *Growth of the Soil* is therefore a kind of beautiful bad faith, a nostalgic fantasy dressed in the language of affirmation. That conclusion would be too quick, and it would miss what is philosophically most interesting about the novel.

Consider what the alternative would look like. A novel that straightforwardly celebrated instinctual life without any trace of irony, without any narrative distance, without any acknowledgment of the gap between the author's position and the protagonist's, would not be more honest; it would be less honest. It would be pretending that the Schiller problem does not exist. It would be a sentimental work in the debased sense — one that indulges a feeling without examining its conditions. The counter-tradition at its weakest does exactly this: it produces pastoral fantasy, idealized primitivism, the literary equivalent of a city-dweller who buys a farmhouse for the weekends and calls it returning to nature. Hamsun's novel, whatever its difficulties, is not that.

What *Growth of the Soil* actually does is formally inscribe the Schiller problem rather than evade it. The novel does not pretend to speak from Isak's position. Its narrative voice is not Isak's voice. It is a voice that watches Isak with something between reverence and irony, that describes his actions with a kind of wondering precision that Isak himself would never apply to them, that is visibly moved by a mode of being it cannot inhabit. The gap between the narrator's consciousness and Isak's is not a flaw in the novel's design; it is the novel's most philosophically serious feature. By making that gap visible — by refusing to collapse the distance between the knowing observer and the unreflective actor — Hamsun produces something more rigorous than a simple affirmation of earth-rooted life. He produces a meditation on what it means to value something you cannot be.

Hamsun's position is philosophically defensible, and it has a precise location within the intellectual debate of 1917. The Enlightenment tradition, in its strongest form, would say that the counter-tradition's nostalgia for instinctual wholeness is simply confused — that what it mourns is a condition of unfreedom, that genuine human fulfillment requires the reflective self-consciousness that civilization develops, and that the peasant's unreflective rootedness is not wholeness but limitation. The counter-tradition, in its strongest form, would say that reflective self-consciousness is itself the disease, that the capacity to stand outside one's own life and evaluate it is not freedom but alienation, and that what civilization calls development is in fact impoverishment. Both

positions, stated this baldly, are too simple. The Enlightenment position cannot account for the genuine losses that attend the development of reflective consciousness — the anxiety, the rootlessness, the sense of meaninglessness that Nietzsche diagnosed as nihilism and that the depopulation of rural Europe was making materially visible. The counter-tradition cannot account for the fact that its own most powerful expressions are products of the reflective consciousness it condemns.

Hamsun's novel does not resolve this impasse. But it does something more valuable than resolution: it holds the impasse open and makes it felt. The narrative voice of *Growth of the Soil* is the voice of a sentimental consciousness watching a naïve one, and it watches with full awareness that what it sees cannot be recovered, only witnessed. That stance is not resignation. It is a form of philosophical honesty that the debate between Enlightenment progressivism and Romantic vitalism rarely achieved in its theoretical formulations, because theoretical formulations are under pressure to resolve what they examine, while a novel can sustain irresolution as a structural feature.

The Prose That Forgets It Is Prose

The philosophical argument *Growth of the Soil* makes would be unconvincing if the novel's prose did not enact it at the level of style. What is philosophically most remarkable about the novel — and what makes it formally unlike anything else in Hamsun's career — is the quality of the prose voice itself: its flatness, its refusal of psychological interiority for Isak, its preference for listing what he does over analyzing what he thinks or feels.

Hamsun before *Growth of the Soil* was a prose writer of intense and demonstrative interiority. *Hunger* (1890), his breakthrough work, is almost entirely constituted by consciousness — a narrator so absorbed in his own mental states, so relentlessly self-observing, that the external world barely registers except as a provocation for further self-analysis. *Pan* (1894) is organized around lyrical nature mysticism, the narrator's rapturous relationship to the Norwegian landscape experienced from inside a consciousness fully aware of its own romanticism. Both are sentimental in Schiller's precise sense: consciousness watching itself feel, always at one remove from immediate experience, always observing the act of observation. They are brilliant novels, and they belong to the same literary tradition as Dostoevsky and Strindberg, the tradition in which the instability and intensity of consciousness is itself the subject.

Growth of the Soil is a different kind of book, and the difference is formal before it is thematic. The prose that renders Isak's actions is deliberately, persistently flat. When Isak builds a wall, the prose describes the building of the wall without entering his experience of it — without telling us what the work feels like, what he thinks while he does it, what it means to him. It lists. "He built a stable, a barn, a shed." The syntax is paratactic, the rhythm patient, the detail concrete and unadorned. The effect is not of a mind recording a body's actions but of something closer to the actions themselves, as though the prose has nearly effaced the presence of a recorder. Nearly — not entirely, because

no prose can efface its own presence entirely, and the Schiller problem is in this gap.

This stylistic flatness is not naïvety. It is constructed naïvety — prose written by a consciousness that has chosen to subordinate itself to its subject, to withdraw the usual apparatus of psychological analysis and rhetorical intensity, in order to produce on the page something analogous to what Isak's life actually is. The procedure is philosophically serious because the alternative — writing Isak's inner life with the same intensity that *Hunger* writes the narrator's — would betray the argument. To give Isak Hamsun's own full psychological interiority would be to make him sentimental, to produce the precise falsification that the Schiller analysis predicts. The prose that is most faithful to Isak is the prose that most effaces itself, and Hamsun's stylistic choice is the formal enactment of this recognition.

But the flatness is also, necessarily, a performance. No prose written by a sophisticated literary artist for a literate audience can simply be flat; it can only seem flat. The apparent artlessness is itself an art, and the reader who is moved by Isak's wordless persistence is being moved by the work of a writer who has carefully calibrated the degree of interiority-withdrawal required to produce the effect of naïve action. This is the contradiction in small: the most successful rendering of naïve life requires the most controlled deployment of sentimental technique. The prose knows exactly what it is doing, which is why it can produce the effect of not knowing.

The contrast with Pan is instructive. In that novel, the narrator Thomas Glahn experiences the Norwegian wilderness through a consciousness that is explicitly romantic, explicitly literary, explicitly aware of its own responses as responses to a scene that has aesthetic and emotional significance. Nature in *Pan* is nature perceived — charged, personal, literary. Nature in *Growth of the Soil* is nature worked. Isak does not experience the landscape; he works with it. The soil he clears does not strike him as beautiful or significant; it is resistant material that yields to sustained effort. The shift from the romantic gaze to the laboring hand is Hamsun's most precise formal argument about what the vitalist counter-tradition requires that most of its literary expressions fail to deliver: not the admiration of natural life but immersion in it, and the prose technique that renders immersion without aestheticizing it is the novel's most significant achievement.

Watching Isak: How the Novel Enacts the Problem It Cannot Solve

To watch Isak work is to watch someone who has no opinion about working. He clears land because land is there to be cleared. He builds because shelter is needed. He is hungry, so he eats; tired, so he sleeps. The narrative voice attends him with philosophical precision: it does not pretend to inhabit his world. The prose circles Isak from outside, noting the size of his hands, the steadiness of his pace, the way he moves through seasons as though seasons were simply the shape time takes. Warmth is in this attention, but so is the unmistakable quality of observation — the quality of someone watching a phenomenon they cannot enter.

The charge against this procedure would run as follows: that Hamsun, unable to recover naïve life himself, simply makes it beautiful to look at, converting a philosophical problem into a literary pleasure and thereby evading rather than confronting the difficulty. The charge has force. There are passages in the novel where Isak's labor achieves a kind of luminosity that feels suspiciously comfortable, where the reader is invited to admire rather than think. But these passages do not dominate the novel's actual procedure, and what prevents them from doing so is the consistency with which the narrative voice marks its own position as external. The reverence is never allowed to become identification. The narrator knows things Isak does not know, uses words Isak would not use, perceives ironies that Isak is constitutionally incapable of perceiving — and this gap is kept open throughout. The result is not aestheticization but something more uncomfortable: the reader is given access to a form of life they are simultaneously shown they cannot access. The beauty is real, and the distance is real, and neither cancels the other.

What this produces philosophically is a demonstration rather than an assertion. Schiller's argument was that the sentimental consciousness cannot recover naïve wholeness because the very act of recognizing naïve wholeness as something valuable is already the mark of its loss. Hamsun does not state this argument. He enacts it. Every sentence that renders Isak's life with precision and care is a sentence written by someone who is not Isak, and the accumulation of such sentences is the accumulation of evidence for the unbridgeable distance. The novel's form is its philosophical content.

Eleseus and the Problem of the Second Generation

If Isak is the novel's philosophical case for rooted life, his son Eleseus is the case it cannot resolve. Eleseus is born into the farm, formed by it, and then sent — by Isak's ambition for him, not his own — to be educated in the town. He learns to read and write, acquires the habits of the clerical class, and discovers that he cannot go back. Not that he doesn't want to; the novel is careful to show that his attachment to Sellanraa is genuine, that he is not a character who has been corrupted into preferring town life. He has simply become someone for whom the farm's kind of existence is no longer fully available. He is in the precise position Schiller describes: he recognizes the value of what he came from and cannot inhabit it. He is sentimental about Sellanraa — moved by it, nostalgic for it, constitutionally unable to live it.

Eleseus's failure is one of the novel's most philosophically precise moments because it locates the mechanism of loss not in the character's own choices but in the father's. Isak sends his son to school. The decision is not irrational — education means opportunity, and Isak is not so naïve as to be indifferent to his children's prospects. But the decision sets in motion precisely the irreversible process that Schiller had diagnosed: once Eleseus has been formed by the reflective consciousness of the educated class, he cannot be unformed. The boundary between naïve and sentimental, once crossed, cannot be recrossed by choice. The second generation's loss is the first generation's gift.

This produces the novel's most uncomfortable implication for the vitalist argument. The form of life Isak has built at Sellanraa requires, for its continuation, children who remain within it — who are formed by it so thoroughly that leaving never becomes the natural trajectory. But the conditions that make children of Sellanraa possible are also conditions of poverty and isolation, and the practical intelligence of rooted life includes knowing when those conditions are changing and when escape is necessary for survival. The parents who send their children to school are doing what practical intelligence requires; the result is the dissolution of the form of life that produced the practical intelligence. Eleseus is not a failure or a weakling. He is the normal outcome of rooted life encountering the conditions under which rooted life can no longer sustain its own continuation. Isak's form of existence was available to Isak because he arrived at his land at the right historical moment, with the right combination of physical capacity, historical circumstance, and absence of alternatives. His son inherits the land but not the conditions that made the land sufficient.

The novel does not sentimentalize this. Eleseus leaves, drifts, fails to establish himself, and his absence is rendered with the same flat precision that renders Isak's presence. Hardy would have made something philosophically elaborate of Eleseus's trajectory; Hamsun simply shows it happening, with the same matter-of-fact attention he brings to the building of walls and the clearing of fields. The flatness is part of the argument. What the second generation loses is not described as a loss because the narrative voice that would call it a loss is itself the product of the very process it would be mourning. The prose cannot mourn Eleseus's departure without becoming sentimental in exactly the way the novel has been resisting.

The Civilization Characters and the Problem of the Stacked Deck

The more difficult question concerns Geissler and Barbro, because here the novel's honesty is genuinely at risk. If the characters who represent civilization's logic are simply made to fail — if Geissler's speculations collapse and Barbro's corruption is punished — then the novel has not inscribed a genuine irresolution but has merely dressed a pastoral polemic in the clothes of complexity. The counter-tradition from Rousseau onward is full of this maneuver: civilization is shown to be hollow, nature is shown to be sustaining, and the argument is won by narrative arrangement rather than philosophical rigor.

Geissler is the test case, and he is a genuinely strange creation. He is not hollow. He is, in many respects, the most intellectually alive figure in the novel — perceptive, mobile, capable of seeing Isak's world with the narrator's own compound of reverence and irony. He understands what Isak represents. He can articulate it. And this is precisely what disqualifies him from it. Geissler moves through the novel as a man who comprehends value without being able to embody it, who recognizes the weight of rooted life while remaining constitutionally incapable of staying still. His speculations are not simply punished; they are shown to be the expression of a particular kind of consciousness — restless, analytical, perpetually oriented toward the next transaction — that is

incompatible with the life he admires. The novel does not make him a villain. It makes him a diagnosis.

This is philosophically more serious than simple condemnation, but not without its own problem. Geissler's fate still functions as a kind of negative proof for Isak's way of life, and the novel does arrange its evidence with a thumb on the scale. The speculative economy that Geissler represents is shown to be unstable, extractive, ultimately self-defeating, while Isak's farm persists and grows. One can object that this is too convenient — that the novel has chosen its historical moment carefully, setting its action in a context where the land still yields to individual labor, before the full weight of industrial agriculture and market dependency has made Isak's mode of existence as precarious as Geissler's. The objection is not trivial. Hamsun is writing in 1917, and the world he is describing is already, in important respects, a world that no longer exists in the form he renders it.

Barbro is a harder case still, because her treatment comes closest to the stacked deck. She is corrupted by town life, commits infanticide, is tried and effectively acquitted, and returns to the land — but the novel's sympathy for her is thin, and the narrative voice does not extend to her the compound of reverence and irony it extends to Isak. She is more nearly a cautionary figure, and cautionary figures are the instruments of polemic. If the novel's honesty depends on its refusal to resolve the tension between civilization and vital life, then Barbro's function as a warning partially undermines that refusal. The novel is more honest about its own contradictions in some places than in others, and this unevenness is worth naming rather than explaining away.

The Exception That Tests the Thesis

Inger — Isak's wife — poses a more direct challenge to the Schiller framework than either Geissler or Barbro, and her full arc, which is philosophically the most complex trajectory in the novel, deserves more careful examination than it typically receives.

Inger begins the novel with a hare lip — a physical marking that, in the social world of rural Norway at the turn of the century, meant she was unmarriageable and had been hidden, kept from ordinary social participation, waiting in a kind of pre-social suspension for whoever might take her. Isak takes her, not from calculation but because she is there and because she is willing and because that is enough for him. The hare lip connects Inger's arc to the novel's mythology: she is, from the beginning, someone excluded from the social order by a mark she did not choose, someone whose belonging to Sellanraa is not a matter of social credential but of the same elemental acceptance that characterizes Isak's relationship to the land itself. She arrives at Sellanraa already excluded from civilization's ordinary arrangements, which makes her the natural complement to Isak's own exclusion from the social world of ambition and self-advancement.

The infanticide is the crisis that concentrates the novel's philosophical argument in the most uncomfortable way. Inger kills the child because it has a hare lip — because she recognizes in it

the mark that made her own life what it was, and she cannot bear to pass that life on. The act is both the most understandable and the most terrible thing in the novel. It is not the product of civilization's corrupting influence; Inger has not yet been to the city, has not yet acquired sentimentality, is still — at the moment of the killing — as close to the naïve mode as she will ever be. And in the naïve mode she kills her child. What this reveals is that the naïve mode the novel has been valuing is not morally transparent or innocently good; it contains the capacity for a violence that is not the product of modern corruption but of something older and more frightening — the violence of a consciousness that acts from immediate necessity without the reflective intervention that civilization develops.

This is the novel's most honest moment, and it is purchased at a considerable cost to the vitalist argument. The case for naïve rootedness had rested partly on the implicit assumption that the naïve consciousness, living close to natural rhythms, would produce a form of life that was at least morally simpler and cleaner than the tortured ambivalences of the sentimental mode. Inger's infanticide destroys this assumption. The naïve consciousness does not produce innocence; it produces immediacy, and immediacy includes the capacity to act from the most basic forms of self-protection and recognized resemblance without the moral reflection that might intervene.

Inger is taken away to prison for the infanticide, spends years in a reformatory institution, and comes back visibly altered. She has learned skills, developed tastes, acquired an interest in dress and appearance and the minor comforts of modernity. She is, in Schiller's terms, on her way to becoming a sentimental consciousness — someone who now has opinions about her own existence rather than simply living it. She now experiences her life as a life, as something to be assessed and shaped according to preferences she has formed. This is precisely what Isak cannot do, and his wife's transformation therefore introduces into Sellanraa the very division between reflective and unreflective consciousness that the novel's beginning had held at bay.

And then she returns. Not immediately and not without friction, but the novel shows the process of her re-integration as genuine. She resumes the rhythms of the farm. The alteration persists in certain respects — she remains in some ways a more complicated person than the Inger who left — but the rootedness reasserts itself. By the novel's end she is part of Sellanraa in the way that the farm requires.

If Schiller's argument is strictly correct — if crossing into sentimental consciousness is irreversible — then Inger's re-integration should be either impossible or fraudulent. The novel presents it as neither. Inger's arc suggests that the sentimental and the naïve are not simply separated by a one-way door but exist in a more dynamic relationship, that the civilized consciousness can, under the right conditions, be partially recovered toward rootedness even if it cannot be fully returned to original wholeness. The latter reading is more generous to the novel, and not obviously wrong. But Inger's full arc — including the infanticide — cannot be passed over as though it were unproblematic. The naïve mode the novel valorizes is also the mode in which a mother kills a child

for looking like herself. The Schiller argument must be held against her story rather than allowed to stand unchallenged by the one character whose trajectory most directly tests it.

The Honest Contradiction Has Limits

These difficulties — Barbro's thinness, Inger's complicating arc — are real, and the honesty of the novel requires naming them. They do not, however, cancel what Hamsun achieves, and what he achieves is rarer than it looks. The tradition he is working within — the long counter-Enlightenment argument from Rousseau through the German Romantics to Nietzsche and Bergson — had consistently failed at the point where honesty was most required: the point where the thinker's own position as a reflective, civilized consciousness had to be acknowledged as part of the problem rather than exempted from it. Hamsun does not exempt himself. The novel's form enacts his implication in the very condition it diagnoses, and this enactment is more philosophically rigorous than the self-exemptions of his predecessors.

Hamsun does not offer a program. He does not suggest that urban readers should return to the land, and the novel's own formal situation — a sophisticated literary work addressed to a literate audience — makes any such suggestion self-refuting. What he offers instead is something more modest and, in its modesty, more defensible: a sustained act of attention to a form of life that the dominant intellectual currents of his moment were either romanticizing or dismissing, and an insistence that this form of life be seen clearly rather than instrumentalized for someone else's argument.

The vitalist tradition from Rousseau to Bergson had consistently used figures like Isak as arguments — as evidence for a philosophical position that the figures themselves were not consulted about and could not have understood. Hamsun's novel, by keeping the narrator's distance visible, refuses this instrumentalization even while participating in it. The contradiction is irreducible: the novel cannot help being a sophisticated literary artifact that uses Isak's life for its own purposes, but it can — and does — make that use visible rather than concealing it behind a false claim to speak from Isak's position. The visibility is the philosophical contribution.

What remains for the sentimental consciousness, short of fantasy, is a chastened orientation. Not the recovery of naïve wholeness — the novel is clear that this is unavailable — but a more honest relationship to the fact of its unavailability. The reader who has followed the novel's procedure cannot come away believing that the return to instinctual rootedness is simply a matter of choosing it, or that the problem of civilization is solved by admiring those who have not yet fully entered it. The distance is too carefully maintained for that consolation. What remains is the recognition of a genuine loss — not sentimental, because it is not accompanied by the illusion that the loss can be undone, but not merely melancholy either, because the recognition itself is a form of clarity.

But the novel's irresolution, however honestly maintained, does not fully escape the pastoral nostalgia it formally resists. The thumb on the scale in Barbro's treatment, the convenient stability of Isak's world against the instability of Geissler's, the selection of a historical moment before industrial modernity has fully arrived to complicate the picture — these are not incidental features but structural ones, and they indicate that the novel's honesty has limits. Hamsun sustains the Schiller problem more rigorously than most, but not all the way down. At certain points the argument he formally refuses to make is made anyway, by narrative arrangement, by the distribution of sympathy, by the choice of what to show and what to leave in shadow.

A work that sustains a genuine philosophical difficulty more honestly than its tradition has managed, even if imperfectly, has done something worth taking seriously. The question *Growth of the Soil* leaves open — whether the sentimental consciousness can find any genuine orientation toward vital life, or whether the recognition of loss is the only honest position available — is not a question the novel answers, and the refusal to answer is, in the end, the right refusal. The philosophical situation does not support an answer. What it supports is exactly what the novel provides at its best: a precise, unflinching account of the distance, maintained long enough and carefully enough that the reader cannot mistake the distance for the thing itself, and cannot mistake the longing for a solution.

What the Ending Does and Does Not Claim

The novel's ending is one of the most philosophically precise closures in modern Scandinavian literature, and its precision is achieved through what it refuses rather than what it asserts. The final pages show Isak plowing — not completing some great achievement, not receiving a vindication, not being shown to have won against civilization's pressures. He is simply doing what he has always done, as he has always done it, in the land he has always worked. The English translation of the novel's closing rhythm — the repeated "and so, and so" that mirrors the Norwegian original's "og så, og så" — is the sound of continuation without destination, of a form of life that does not know it is philosophically significant and therefore does not need to announce its significance.

The choice of ending here, rather than at any of the novel's several dramatic crisis points, is itself a philosophical argument about what kind of conclusion the novel's subject admits. A narrative organized around the development of individual consciousness — the Bildungsroman, the psychological novel, the confessional mode — ends when the development has reached some resolution: a recognition, a decision, a transformation. Isak's form of life has none of these. There is no recognition scene because the naïve consciousness does not stand outside itself and recognize what it is. There is no transformation because the novel's argument is that Isak is not transforming — that the non-transformation is the virtue. The ending is not an anti-climax; it is the formal completion of what the novel has been constructing throughout: proof that the naïve mode of existence is not organized around peaks and resolutions but around the continuous rhythm of

seasonal labor, which does not build toward anything outside itself.

What this ending cannot do — and what the novel, in its honesty, does not pretend it can do — is demonstrate that Isak's form of life is available, replicable, or recoverable for the reader who has just finished it. The reader of *Growth of the Soil* is not Isak. The act of reading the novel, of receiving its argument through the medium of a sophisticated literary form addressed to a literate audience, is itself the mark of the distance the novel describes. The ending continues; the reader closes the book. The continuation and the closure are simultaneous, and the distance between them is the Schiller problem in its most precise form. The novel ends where Isak's life goes on, and the going on is, by definition, something the novel cannot follow — can only indicate, and leave.

The Politics the Philosophy Enabled

Any honest engagement with *Growth of the Soil* must eventually face a biographical fact that the philosophical framing, however rigorous, cannot insulate itself from. Knut Hamsun collaborated with the Nazi occupation of Norway. He met Hitler. He wrote a public eulogy for Joseph Goebbels at the end of the war — after the death camps, after everything. He encouraged Norwegian young men to volunteer for the German war effort. He was tried for treason after Norway's liberation and, being found mentally diminished by age, was fined rather than imprisoned, but the record of what he did and said is unambiguous. He was, by his own choices and in full possession of his literary powers through most of the relevant period, a supporter of National Socialism.

Hamsun's collaboration is not incidental to the ideas the novel embodies. The vitalist critique of liberal civilization — its contempt for the rootless, the cosmopolitan, the urban, the commercial; its exaltation of the organic, the rooted, the vital over the rational and the reflective — has a political valence, and in the European context of the early twentieth century that valence pointed in a particular direction. Hamsun did not stumble accidentally into fascism. He arrived there by following the logic of his own convictions to a conclusion that the novel already contains in potential. The suspicion of urban rationalism, the reverence for soil and rootedness, the hostility to the mobile and the modern, the implicit nativism of a vision in which authentic human life is located in a specific people's relationship to a specific land — these are not merely pastoral preferences. They are the conceptual vocabulary of a politics, and the politics is the one that Hamsun eventually endorsed.

The question this raises is not whether the novel is therefore without value, which would be too simple. It is whether the novel's philosophical irresolution is as honest as the argument above has claimed. A reading that praises Hamsun for inscribing the Schiller problem without exempting himself from it, for sustaining genuine difficulty rather than resolving it by polemic — and then does not mention that the author resolved it by polemic in his own life, in the most consequential and destructive way available — has not completed its argument. The honest contradiction that the novel embodies formally was not, for Hamsun, a resting place. He found his way through it. That

the way through was catastrophic does not retroactively make the novel into propaganda; *Growth of the Soil* is more philosophically careful than Hamsun's political commitments. But the gap between the novel's formal honesty and the author's political resolution is itself philosophically significant — a demonstration that sustaining irresolution in a literary work is not the same as inhabiting it in a life, and that the sentimental consciousness, for all its capacity to recognize the naïve, retains the capacity to betray its own recognition.

Isak's Heirs: The Vitalist Tradition in the Present Tense

The political tradition of which Hamsun's collaboration with National Socialism is the most catastrophic literary expression did not end with the defeat of fascism in 1945. The conceptual vocabulary of blood-and-soil nationalism — its opposition of organic rootedness to rootless cosmopolitanism, its privileging of the agricultural and the provincial over the urban and the mobile, its identification of national identity with territorial attachment and its suspicion of those who lack such attachment — was discredited by association with the crimes committed in its name. But the underlying intuitions it organized survived their discrediting and have returned, across the first decades of the twenty-first century, as the animating ideology of a global political movement that does not call itself fascist and in most cases is not fascist, but draws on the same conceptual sources and follows the same structural logic.

The Hungarian case is the most explicit. Viktor Orbán's political program is organized around the defense of Christian rootedness against cosmopolitan liberalism — a Hungary of families, farms, and faith against the mobile, secular, globally connected world that threatens to dissolve it. The rhetoric about "globalist elites," about Hungary as a nation that must protect its Christian heritage and its demographic coherence against those with no homeland and no tradition to defend, deploys a vocabulary that would have been entirely legible to Hamsun: the rooted against the rootless, the particular community against the universal abstraction, the soil against the market. Orbán's invocations of the Hungarian land, the Hungarian peasant tradition, the organic continuity of a people with a specific territory are not decorative nationalism. They are the vitalist argument translated into electoral politics, with all its implicit conclusions about which people belong on which soil and which do not.

The French tradition that Marine Le Pen inherits operates on identical terms. *La France profonde* — deep France, the France of the countryside and the provincial town — is the authentic France against the metropolitan abstraction that governs it. Paris, cosmopolitan, culturally mixed, oriented toward Europe and the world, is in this rhetoric not quite fully French; the authentic France lives in the agricultural regions, in the fishing ports, in the communities that have not been dissolved by mobility and mixture. The *terroir* that French culture celebrates in its wine and its cuisine — the specific quality that a particular piece of earth gives to what grows in it, a quality untransferable and unportable — is in this political tradition extended from agriculture to identity: the French

person who has grown from French soil possesses a *terroir* that the recent arrival cannot, whatever the liberal universalism of the Republic insists about citizenship. The argument is Hamsun's; the application is explicit.

In the United States, the same argument organizes one of the dominant political divisions of the current era. The "heartland" against the "coastal elites" — the authentic, rooted America of the agricultural interior against the mobile, educated, globally connected America of the cities — maps the vitalist opposition onto American geography with a precision that requires no elaboration for anyone who has followed a national election. The symbolic center of the movement's emotional appeal is not primarily a policy platform but an image: the farmer, the manufacturing worker, the small-town tradesman — figures of productive rootedness, of bodies engaged with specific material in specific places — against the consultant, the academic, the technologist, whose work is portable, whose social connections are cosmopolitan, whose identity is defined by education and mobility rather than by belonging. Germany's AfD constructs its appeal around *Heimat* — homeland, the specific attachment to a German place and a German way of life — against the dissolution of that attachment by multicultural liberalism and European integration. Italy's governing tradition speaks of *radici*, roots, the defense of a specific Italian inheritance against homogenizing Europeanism. The idioms vary; the structure is identical across all of them.

That the actual electoral coalitions supporting these movements are largely suburban, largely dependent on the global economy, and in no practical sense living the rooted lives they valorize does not diminish the power of the image. On the contrary, it confirms Schiller's analysis with painful exactness. The sentimental consciousness does not live the naïve life; it yearns for it. The voter who has never plowed a field but feels the pull of the heartland image — who is moved by the picture of agricultural rootedness from the position of someone who cannot and would not actually inhabit it — is in the structural position of Schiller's sentimental poet contemplating the peasant. The movement sells the feeling of Isak's life to people living nothing like it, and the transaction works because the feeling is genuine even when the life is not available. The suburban MAGA voter, the French *périurbain* who commutes to the city and votes Le Pen, the Hungarian professional who cheers Orbán's peasant imagery from an apartment in Budapest — these are not hypocrites. They are sentimental in Schiller's precise sense: they recognize in Isak's world something they have lost and cannot recover, and they vote for the politician who promises to make the feeling of that world available again without requiring them to actually live it.

The vitalist political tradition has proved so durable and so resistant to purely rational counter-argument for precisely this reason. It does not primarily make claims that are straightforwardly false. There are genuine losses attending the development of mobile, cosmopolitan, market-integrated civilization — the dissolution of local community, the erosion of intergenerational continuity, the replacement of specific attachment by abstract exchange — and the Enlightenment tradition that opposes this politics has never fully accounted for them. What the vitalist tradition does, rather, is offer the sentimental experience of rootedness as a substitute for

rootedness itself: the feeling of organic belonging delivered through political identification rather than through the actual labor of living on and with a specific piece of earth. Isak did not vote for his way of life. He built it, at enormous cost, through decades of silent physical work in conditions the novel does not romanticize. The movements that invoke his life as their political talisman propose to deliver it through the ballot box and the border wall, which is precisely the shortcut that Hamsun's novel, for all its other contradictions, never endorses. The novel earns its image of Isak at the cost of hundreds of pages of unromantic attention to what his life actually requires. The politics borrows the image without paying the cost.

Hamsun's personal trajectory suggests that the sentimental longing for rootedness, once it becomes political, requires an enemy: the rootless, the cosmopolitan, the mobile other whose presence is held responsible for the dissolution of the organic community. The move from cultural critique to political program to the identification of a removable enemy is not the inevitable conclusion of every vitalist argument — there are versions of the communitarian tradition, the localist tradition, the agrarian tradition, that resist this trajectory. But it is the characteristic path of the argument when it abandons literary irresolution for political commitment and when the social conditions that produce the longing for rootedness are not being addressed by any other means. The novel sustains the tension between the sentimental and the naïve indefinitely, because a novel can. A political movement cannot. It must produce results, identify agents of failure, and give the sentimental consciousness someone to blame for the loss of what it never actually had.

The novel does not endorse this trajectory. Its formal honesty — the refusal to collapse the distance between the narrator's sentimental consciousness and Isak's naïve one, the acknowledgment that what is being watched cannot be recovered by those who watch it with reverence — is precisely what the political tradition abandons when it converts literary intuition into electoral program. A program requires enemies and requires action; a novel can hold the difficulty open. The distance between Hamsun's novel and Hamsun's politics is the distance between the form that sustains irresolution and the will that needs it resolved.

The soil grows. The narrator watches. Hamsun's novel could hold the question open indefinitely, because a novel is not required to act. The political tradition that inherited his imagery was under no such dispensation: it needed enemies, results, a target for the longing it had organized. The question the novel sustained with formal honesty, the tradition answered with catastrophic literalism — and the distance between those two outcomes is the measure of what literary irresolution is worth, and what it cannot do.

What Trump, Orbán, and Marine Le Pen Owe to a Norwegian Farmer: A Philosophical Essay on Growth of the Soil is an independent scholarly essay by Daniel Shilansky.

This essay is also published as the critical introduction to the Heritage Canon philosophical edition of *Growth of the Soil*, available on Amazon. Heritage Canon publishes Daniel Shilansky's

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